

# GUARD DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS BRING TRAINING TO SOLDIERS AND AIRMEN

BY ERIKA N. COTTON

Staff Sgt. Shayne Chapman, a full-time Rhode Island Army National Guard computer specialist, and his wife Jennifer welcomed a child, Tyler, into the world last November.

But the birth of his second son wasn't his only achievement late last year. The sergeant also completed his computer specialist training without having to travel to Ft. Gordon, Ga., where he would have spent four and a half months away from his family.

He was able to stay home with his pregnant wife and their now 2-year-old son, Devin, without missing a beat because he took advantage of the National Guard's distance learning network to complete his military occupation skills qualification (MOSQ) training.

"Command really won. They got to have me here and have me productive at work. We were real short of staff because of deployments," he says. "And because I had just had a newborn and a 1-year-old at home at the time it was nice to be able to be with my family."

The distance learning network is not new, but as technology has advanced, more Guardsmen have begun to take advantage of the state-of-the-art multiuse computer and telecommunications classrooms.

In 1995, Congress established the Distributed Training Technology Project (DTTP) (*box, page 30*), in part, to solve a chronic Guard training problem: providing soldiers and airmen the training they needed closer to home.

Since then, the distance learning network—the DTTP's data highway—has grown from one test site in Iowa to more than 336 virtually interconnected classrooms throughout the Guard's 54 state and territorial organizations.

All of the classrooms have Internet access as well as voice, video, video teleconference (VTC) and data transfer capabilities.

Although the number of distance learning classrooms per state can range from one to 18, most states average about six, according to Kathy Pritchett, chief of joint information technology programs at the National Guard Bureau.

They are usually interspersed throughout the state at college and university campuses, Guard armories and bases and other suitable facilities.

The network supports many types of military training, including first-responder instruction, casualty assistance training, emergency operations support and anti-terrorism training. It also supports professional development courses, ethics briefings, brigade and battalion meetings and enhanced language development.

"The distance learning classrooms also support our homeland security and our homeland defense missions by providing training

for our emergency management and emergency response teams, civil support teams and local and state officials," Ms. Pritchett says.

More recreational purposes, such as checking e-mail, online banking or taking online distance learning courses from colleges or universities is also an option in the classrooms.

"The main difference between distance learning that can be done on any computer and this is that here you link to a live instructor that you don't get with computer software," says Tina Holloway, distance learning manager for the Texas Army Guard. "Most of our courses are interactive courses. You can see the instructor and hear the instructor. The instructor can hear you; the instructor can see you."

This VTC capability allows for face-to-face interaction via satellite and is popular among Guard families, Ms. Pritchett says.

"We always see a big boost in usage right around the holiday season—Thanksgiving through Christmas and New Year's—because at this particular time of the year, as well as throughout the course of the year, military families will go to their DTTP classroom and schedule a VTC with their loved one," she says.

## STUDENTS MULTIPLY

Usage isn't just up during the holidays, though. The reported total usage hours for the network exceeded 315,000 in 2006, up from about 290,000 hours in 2005, Ms. Pritchett says. And the system logged more than 600,000 users this year, up from 317,000 in 2005.

The reason why isn't hard to figure out, according to Col. Patrick Hamilton, director of joint training, exercise and professional development for the Texas Army Guard.

"The word is getting out," he says. "Believe me, guys don't like to drive down to Austin and spend three days going to class." (The Texas Guard's primary training facility is located in Austin.)

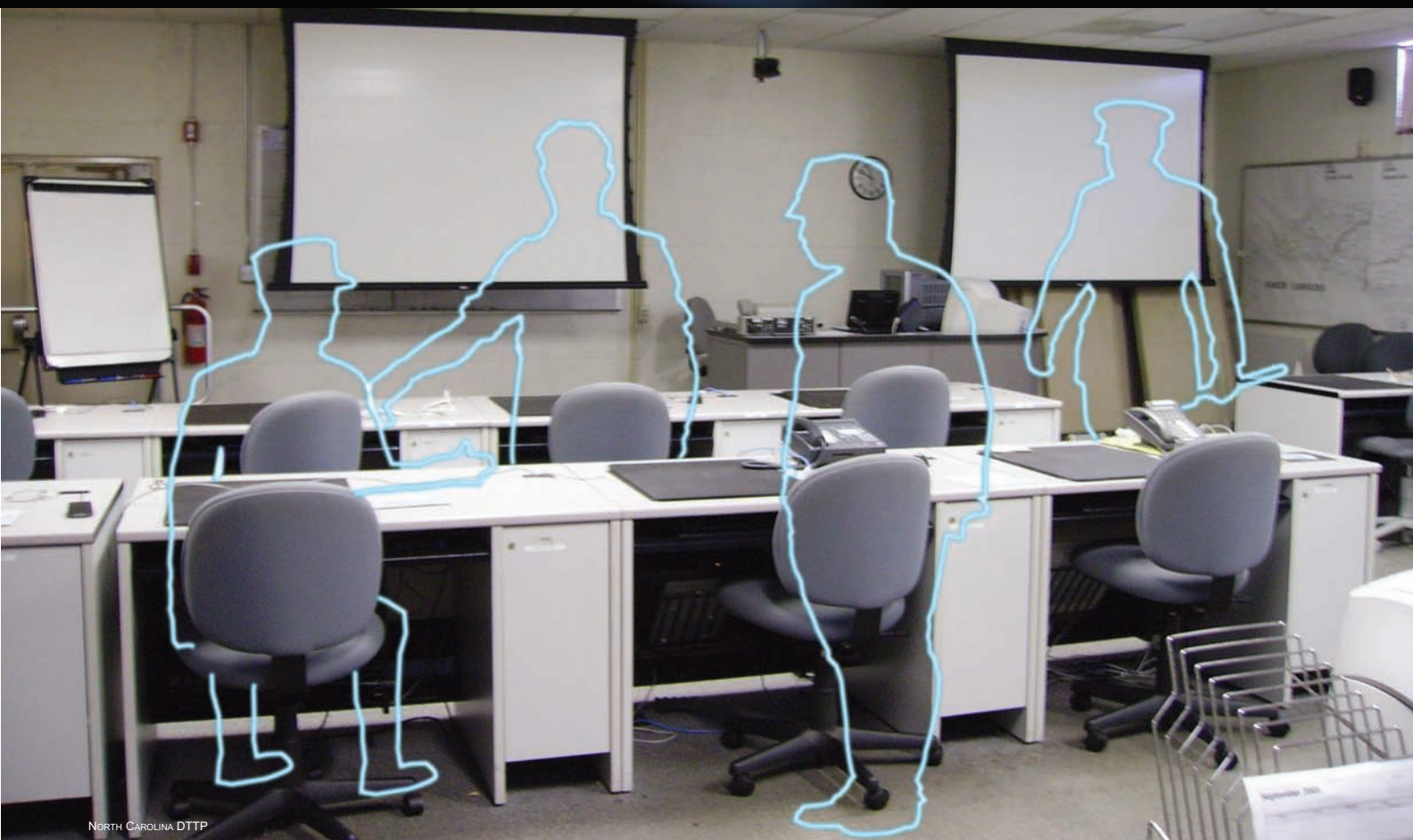
Ms. Holloway agrees, adding that the network is also a huge cost savings for the state, which does not have to pay per diem rates for trips from around the nation's second largest state to Austin.

Ms. Pritchett also says NGB saved approximately \$83 million in 2006 by using DTTP instead of sending Guardsmen to school on temporary duty (TDY). That's an estimated \$6.9 million per month.

"The cost avoidance is staggering," she says. "The network has paid for itself four-fold with just the cost avoidance reported."

In addition, increased mobilizations and technology improvements are also driving the growth in usage, Ms. Pritchett says.

# E-TRAINING



**VIRTUAL CLASSROOM** Video teleconferencing connects distance learning classrooms to points around the world.

Pretty soon, at least in Texas, Guardsmen will have even fewer miles to travel to get the training they need.

Colonel Hamilton says that once funding is procured, the state hopes to set up a mobile distance learning classroom. The necessary equipment—wireless notebook computers, a satellite modem and VTC setup—would fit into the trunk of a car, he says.

“People can schedule to have a mobile classroom come to them, set up and conduct training or an event,” he says. “Technology has gotten to where that’s a feasible thing to do. It’ll be a whole lot more efficient.”

Colonel Hamilton says coming up with enough money to do a valid test is the only thing stalling the project.

Ms. Pritchett says that such enhancements help the DTTP grow.

Another prime technological benefit the network provides is the capability of connecting a home classroom to hundreds of others, says retired Col. Phil Stephan, distance learning manager for the Minnesota Guard.

“An instructor goes to one location, and we can teach 100 people at different locations at once,” he says.

Colonel Hamilton agrees.

“Texas is a big state, and anytime we can conduct classes where we don’t have to put soldiers on the road and travel long distances we’re much better off,” he says.

Sgt. Earl Newman, a distance learning instructor for the Rhode Island Army Guard, has taken and led several of the Guard’s basic medical training courses, including the emergency medical technician refresher course.

“In the medical field, as far as what we have to complete to

sustain our MOSQ, the distance learning training is probably the best thing that's happened to us," he says.

Through the network they're able to get the most up-to-date medical information from active-component and civilian educators and subject matter experts, who put the classes on from Ft. Sam Houston, Texas.

## LIMITATIONS

Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Harper, an infantry instructor for the Texas Army Guard, who became certified to teach the distance learning Total Army instructor training course in August, says he has noticed the training trend moving more toward distance learning.

But he has yet to teach any courses through the network.

"They haven't moved any of our courseware that way," he says. "But I know that they're trying to move some of the common core classes that way."

Sergeant Harper says it makes sense to move the common core classes to distance learning, since there's no practical application involved in them. It's especially a benefit for soldiers who are deployed overseas that have been promoted, he adds.

But the concept for moving more skill-qualification training to distance learning is unlikely anytime soon.

"It's got its advantages. If you're teaching a class that doesn't require field time or range time, I think it's great," Sergeant Harper says. "But it's kind of hard to teach infantry tactics over a computer."

Sergeant Harper says that he can see the briefing sections of the infantry training courses, which are now done by PowerPoint, going to distance learning.

"We could break it up into two phases: One week by VTC and one week in the field with the instructors; that would be great," he says. "But as far as moving the whole course that way, that's impossible."

Some specialties and instruction must remain completely hands-on.

"Two of my courses involve weapons: firing weapons, becoming familiar with them, doing raids and ambushes. There's no TV out there," Sergeant Harper says. "It's an experience you just can't gain without actually being in there. Virtual training is no substitute for feet on the ground and actually doing."

Colonel Hamilton says he thinks the distance learning program has reached a level where the Guard has automated just about all there is to automate.

Colonel Stephan says one of the other major reasons why more MOSQ training is unlikely to move to distance learning anytime soon is funding. The Guard receives money from the government for every seat they fill in the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command school classrooms, he says.

He says it's an unfortunate situation since at least half of the training could be done online.

"It would help our retention, especially with all the deployments, if we could keep them at home for as much of their education as possible," he says. 🦋

*Erika Cotton is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer.*

## COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

Congress funded the National Guard distance learning network with a tri-fold mission: train Guardsmen for military readiness, provide command and control and offer shared usage, says Kathy Pritchett, chief of joint information technology programs for the National Guard Bureau.

Lawmakers took note that the classrooms were interspersed throughout the communities where Guardsmen live, work and serve.

"Recognizing that the classrooms were not being used on a full-time basis by soldiers and airmen, Congress basically said, 'National Guard Bureau, you can share your distance learning assets with the communities when they're not being used by the Guard,'" she says.

In 1996, Congress passed legislation that allowed shared use of the distance learning network. The shared usage allows civilians from the public and private sectors to use the state-of-the-art technology on a cost-reimbursement basis, which helps defray the costs of maintaining and operating the classrooms.

"We enhance the communities we live in by sharing the distance learning technology," says retired Col. Phil Stephan, Minnesota Guard distance learning manager.

Last year, using the network's video conferencing capabilities, the Minnesota Guard connected Shattuck-St. Mary's Academy in Faribault, Minn., to Kelly College in Tavisoc, England, to an American officer, a British officer and Iraqi citizen who were located in downtown Baghdad—all at once.

"Using technology to expose students to the world, I think reaps a lot of benefits," Colonel Stephan says. "It gives them an opportunity to see what their daily lives might be like in the future, encourages them to study science and math and exposes them to the Guard and community in a positive manner."

## LEARN MORE

Guardsmen can gain quick access to classrooms and learn more about distance learning opportunities at [www.dttp.ngb.army.mil](http://www.dttp.ngb.army.mil). The site provides information on the nearest distance learning facility and contact information for a state's distance learning manager.